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THREE ASPECTS
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YOUNG MENNONITE PROBLEMS
by
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H. P. PETERS

Bethel College, Kansas

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The Critical Economic Condition of Mennonite Youth

The discussion of the topic on Home Mission at a Western District Conference revealed the fact that our practice in regard to conserving young Mennonite people for the church is somewhat like this: We wait till a group drifts to some larger town and then we try to rescue them, instead of inspiring and interesting the jobless people of the overcrowded communities to get together and settle down in a new place for the purpose of establishing a new Mennonite community. Will this method solve the problem of congested Mennonite communities?

This overcrowdedness in old Mennonite communities is driving Mennonite people off the farm and out of Mennonite communities. There are no longer any frontiers in this country, and we did not have a general outlet for young Mennonite people for the last 25 or 30 years. Some faint attempts to find an outlet have been made in the past, but they have ended in utter failure. Now there seems to be the general belief among some parents that if they want to save their children for the Mennonite church, they must keep them in the home community by all means. Hence they strain all their energy to secure a little piece of land for their children to start with. This attitude to keep the children near home has greatly speeded up the crowding of old Mennonite communities and of crowding off the farms scores of young Mennonite men. Another result is, that many more Mennonites have gone into business and professional life than otherwise would have, which will greatly change Mennonite characteristics.

It is a well admitted fact that successful farming

here in the west can be done only by a complete set of modern implements, which takes about \$2500 to \$3000. Now where can you find a young beginner who has or can afford to spend \$2500 for implements, just in order to rent a farm. A beginner with just a three horse sulky-plow or even a gang plow with horses has no business on the farm. On the other hand, a farmer who owns a half section of land and a modern set of implements can much easier rent another quarter of land 5 or 6 miles away from home than a beginner on the place with a sulky plow and horses. What shall these young men do with themselves? Many are just drifting.

Some four years ago I was informed from good sources, that there were forty Mennonite girls working in Hutchinson, Kansas, mostly from around Buhler and Inman. I told this to a lady in Newton and she said, that she believed there were just as many working in Newton. May we not conclude from this that there are many more working in Wichita? There is no doubt that many are working in McPherson.

The result of this crowded condition is this: On the one hand the cooperative spirit and sympathy of pioneer days is giving way to competition and jealousy. As a friend puts it, there is competition for a dollar-a-day job. On the other hand, there is cold indifference towards the needs of the poor and the down-and-out. Then those who have been struggling against competition for years for a living will not likely settle down in a new place, because they do not want this competition over again.

This condition has just a good start. Our churches are full of young people in the teen-age. What will we do in 10 or 15 years from now when these youngsters take up life on their own responsibilities? They are supposed to be the Mennonite church of tomor-

row. How much support can you expect of them when they will be scattered all over the state of Kansas and the United States?

No doubt we should grow in our Christian activities such as: education, missions, hospitals, etc.; but the church can grow in these activities only if it is on a sound growing basis itself. As the conditions are today, many of the present younger generation will not be property owners.

Note: The writer of this essay has a remedy for this situation.

An Answer to the Article Above

At the last Bethel College corporation meeting of Nov. Nov. 26 the constituency and friends of the school were again reminded of the importance of the college for the church. They were urged to invest in the college financially and to send their young people to school there.

In the early history of the school nearly every student and graduate was looked upon as a church-school teacher, or a potential minister — "Onse Gemeindelerasch." These old time motives for an education are now almost obsolete, for nearly all these old-time church schools have been abandoned.

This modern, complex and competitive time in which we are living has greatly changed the motives for getting an education. New problems confronting the Mennonite church require more trained leadership, than ever before in the history of the church. The most serious and complex problems the Mennonite church is in combat with in its onward march are economic, social and spiritual.

The old, overcrowded Mennonite communities need new territory, in which is needed well trained and tactful leadership. They do not only need leadership to find new territory, but also to study conditions under which success may most likely be assured.

The Mennonite Church needs competent social leaders. The church needs leaders to avoid factions in new settlements. The church needs social leaders to show people how to get along who otherwise are not sociable. New Mennonite communities need to be shown that there is also material gain in co-operation.

Then the Mennonite church is in sore need of spiritual leadership. We need a new interpretation of the best inheritance of our fore-fathers. We are living in a rapidly changing world. How shall we best adjust ourselves into these circumstances without sacrificing our identity?

Some years ago groups of the Mennonite teachers met at Bethel college for a conference. At this conference Prof. P. E. Schellenberg was on the program for this topic: "How can we Inculcate a Great Loyalty in the Mennonite Youth towards Mennonite Institutions." In the discussions Prof. Schellenberg pointed out that many young Mennonites are reluctant of their peculiarities. There is a whole lot of truth in this. Why should our young Mennonites be reluctant to be called Mennonite because of their peculiarities, when other denominations wish they had some of these peculiarities? For instance, take our attitude towards war. What young Mennonites need is information and a new interpretation of our inheritance. This requires new leadership; where should the church look for new leadership, but to its schools of higher education.

Let me illustrate how this might work out. Our

conference used to have a small congregation near Greensburg, Kansas. East of Greensburg is the town of Haviland, West of Greensburg are the small towns of Mullinville and Bucklin. In normal years this is as good a wheat country as there is in Kansas anywhere. Mennonites always had a great affinity for good wheat country. Now, instead of letting this congregation break up and scatter in all directions or joining other Mennonite groups it should have been coached so as to make it a larger congregation and finally be divided into two congregations.

Our college should have sent college men to each of these towns as school teachers properly prepared and interested in the development of this Mennonite settlement. That could have been done when placing of school teachers was much easier than now.

How should they go about it? As new teachers in a new locality, the people would find it only natural if these college men would be interested in how people who pay them wages, were making a living. So some Friday afternoon after they had established themselves as good school teachers, they would stop in at a realestate office or at the office of the secretary of the Chamber of Commerce, (of course each man in his own town). There men would be glad to show them the surrounding country. Here they could find out what chances there are to rent a farm, or to buy a good farm on good terms. They could find out what chances there are to go into business of various kinds or to take up some professional work. Of course, we would expect these teachers to take only the initiative steps.

What could these school teachers do for the little Mennonite group in such a place? By keeping in close contact with the group by taking out an associate membership, they could keep the little Men-

nonite group open-minded and open-hearted towards newcomers. If just a few families stay alone in such a place for a few years they become so absorbed in their little routine of life, that they become incapable for further growth.

Another social problem of these isolated groups is their relationship to the surrounding Protestant churches. They must cooperate with them in many things without losing themselves. Here too, Mennonite high school teachers might act as tactful mediators. In a few years these school teachers might become preachers of these new communities.

In Tribune in western Kansas, there is a young Mennonite college man who owns and edits the only newspaper in the county. The way this young man boosts and advertises his county and community would do credit to an older and more experienced newspaperman. If we could have a man like that in Oakley or Colby or even Paxton, Nebr. how much could he do in the way of advertising or giving information of his country? Such men need not own a newspaper. There are many other ways of doing this.

Another prospective Mennonite settlement may be located near Mingo, Thomas Co., Kansas. This place is about half-way between Colby and Oakley. These towns, and even Goodland further west, may be considered as good territory where Mennonite teachers might be located who could act as workers for the Mennonite Church. In the last few years this country has suffered more from the grasshoppers than from the drouth, which has nothing to do with the productiveness and fertility of the soil. In the average farmers there can raise just as much feed as we can in the central part of the state.

In Cheyenne county, Kansas, the most northwestern county in the state, there is a farmer who to-

gether with his son raised 1,040,000 bu. of wheat in a period of 16 years, an average yield of 20 bushels to an acre. By their own method these farmers also raise potatoes, kaffir corn and barley. This last season they produced 106,700 bushels of wheat at an average yield of 21 bushels to an acre. Besides wheat they raised thousands of bushels of potatoes. This year was a rather off year. Yet 130 acres produced 5000 bushels of potatoes, varying from 40 to 55 bushels per acre. In 1934 they raised their crop with only 9.65 inches of rain. How do they do it? Why can't we learn a lesson from farmers like these?

A third prospective Mennonite settlement could be located in western Nebraska, between the two Platte rivers, near Paxton and Madrid and surrounding country. An old school friend of the writer, who has farmed there 12 years, raised 2700 bushels of wheat one year and over 7500 bushels of corn. Of course corn was so cheap that year that it did not pay for the cost of production. He has a son-in-law in that country who has raised over 3000 bushels of corn this year. One worker was paid \$120.00 for helping him pick this corn.

There is a demand for good school teachers. Wouldn't that be a good inducement to locate some college men there, who while teaching there could locate some farmers? some as renters and others as owners? The most serious problems in these western places are conservation of soil moisture, summer fallowing ground, and the raising of feed. In this way college trained men could be a great help to new-comers. It seems to me that by close cooperation and use of good, scientific methods that country could hold its own.

If some readers have a better plan, let us have it. But let us remember, it must be a place where Men-

nonite youth can make a living and save enough to own a little homestead. Such a place can never be an entirely agricultural country, but a place where there are also opportunities for business and professional pursuits.

In the above article the writer has tried to show what the main problems and obstacles are in the onward march of the Mennonite church. The writer has also tried to show that the church has a right to look to its schools for leadership in all fields. The problems do not begin with our college, however, but with the unsympathetic, non-cooperative attitude in older Mennonite communities. No college can substitute for what is undone at home and in the church. We need a revival of the sympathetic and cooperative spirit of pioneer days. Then our college should be the training camp for the lookout men of the Mennonite church west of the Mississippi river.

Friends, if there is no greater desire to move together into larger groups (self-supporting groups) than there is now, how can we perpetuate or hold our own?

The Material Side of the Kingdom of God

The Kingdom of God is primarily a spiritual Kingdom. As someone has defined it, it is the rule of God in the hearts of men. But this spiritual Kingdom is partly in a material world. It has to grow and extend itself in a material world.

God, the Creator and Ruler of the universe, lets Himself down to insignificant human beings and accepts their material things with which he has entrusted them to further and extend his Kingdom. It takes money to train and send out missionaries to foreign countries. And it takes money to support them there. It takes material things to build hospitals and Christian schools.

The first trouble in the early church at Jerusalem was of a materialistic nature. It is the sad case of Ananias and Sapphira. The early Christians had agreed to have all things in common. They sold their possessions and laid the proceeds at the Apostles' feet; and distribution was made unto each according as any one had need.

This work of distributing food among the needy increased to such an extent that the Twelve Apostles could not tend to it all. So they called the multitude together and said: "It is not fit that we should forsake the word of God and serve tables. Look ye out among you seven men of good report, full of spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will continue steadfastly in prayer and in the ministry of the word." They did so, and we have the election of the first deacons in the church.

This worked very well, By delegating the material

business of the church to laymen, they discovered two very able and efficient evangelists. Without the election of these seven deacons, we would not have the stories of Stephen and Philip. By delegating the material business of the church to laymen, a wider interest was created in the welfare of the church, because more people were actively engaged in church work and were held responsible for their part. By relieving ministers of the material business of the church it saves them from the murmuring and dissatisfaction, which usually falls more severely upon them than upon laymen.

We Mennonites have followed their practice of electing deacons for the individual congregations, and it works very well. But when it comes to the work in conferences, that is a different matter. There nearly all the work is done by ministers. There is hardly a board or committee that is not dominated by ministers. Some of the work done by these boards and committees is a discredit to themselves and to the church. "It is not fit that we should forsake the word of God and serve tables. But we will continue steadfastly in prayer, and in the ministry of the word." Have not the Apostles here drawn a clear line as to what kind of work should be done by ministers and what kind by laymen?

Of course, ministers should be informed about all the kinds of work to be done. Like the Apostles, they may argue and discuss these problems in the assembly; but this is very different from taking a managing and administrative part in it. We may say, we have not the able laymen to do all the necessary material business of the church. But why do we not have them? Is it not because we do not train them and do not trust them? That is why we do not have them.

Paul taught his gentile Christians how to give. He raised a collection among the gentile Christians for the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem who were in need and distress. We must not construe this as if Paul became a general solicitor of funds for the needy. No, Paul was on the way to Jerusalem to defend his work among the gentiles and to defend his gentile Christians. What better argument could he put before the leaders in Jerusalem, than to show them, here is what your gentile brethren think of you and have done for you? He used these material things, even money, to bridge over to a more brotherly relationship between gentile Christians and Jewish Christians. That was something new in the world at that time. Paul was just giving them an object-lesson of what was supposed to be done by others later. Paul was such a sincere and devoted missionary, that he did not even take time to baptize all his converts, but had them baptized by others.

We see, the ways in which material things may promote or hinder the growth of the Kingdom of God are innumerable. As long as the Spiritual Kingdom dominates material things, the Kingdom of God prospers. But as soon as material things dominate the Spiritual Kingdom, the Kingdom of God is retarded in its growth.

The Mennonite church, too, faces many serious problems today. One of these problems is also of a materialistic nature. On account of overcrowdedness young people have no chance of starting on any vocation. This condition threatens to drive many young people out of Mennonite communities. A poor young Mennonite family may be ever so orthodox and loyal to its church; but if it is unable to make a living in the overcrowded community, it may be forced to leave the Mennonite community and find

another place for making a living; sometimes regardless of what church connection they may find.

Let us see how a man of Old Testament time solved this problem of overcrowdedness. Abraham and Lot had been living together in Canaan for several years. One day Abraham discovered that there was strife between his herdsmen and Lot's herdsmen on account of scarcity of pasture. The land was not able to bear them, that they might dwell together. And Abraham said to Lot: Let there be no strife between us and our herdsmen. Separate thyself from me, I pray thee. If thou wilt take the left hand, I will go to the right. Or if thou take the right hand, then I will go to the left. Abraham saw that separation by distance was not nearly as detrimental than separation by faith and relationship.

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Though Abraham had the right to the first choice, he let Lot choose first. Lot chose the fertile plain on the Jordan which was well watered; and he probably became as rich as Abraham. Abraham always had the right attitude towards material things. He had wavered but once in his life time, when he fled to Egypt. With Lot's material gain came also the feeling of independence from Abraham, and the desire for more social recognition. He finally moved to Sodom, where he found more social life. Abraham never changed his spiritual fellowship with Lot and never changed his relationship with him. He always cared for Lot. When the enemies came and took Sodom and Lot with his whole household and carried them into captivity, Abraham armed 318 of his most able bodied men, pursued the enemy and defeated them. If Lot did not keep his side of the agreement, that did not mean to say that Abraham's plan for separation was not workable.

In the Mennonite churah there is much the same situation as between Abraham and Lot. In all the

older Mennonite communities there is a silent strife for more wheatland. The land is not able to bear them that they might dwell together. But who among us will say: Separate thyself, I pray thee, from me; if thou wilt take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if thou take the right hand, then I will go to the left? Our fathers and grandfathers traveled half-way around the world to find a new place for worship, but we cannot travel a few hours away by auto to relieve pressure at home. When a congregation is strong enough to support itself, young beginners should be encouraged to move out into a new community. That will keep up the bond of union and cooperation. They should see the material gain in community life and cooperation.

The Mennonite church, one of the smallest denominations, must continue to regroup or deconcentrate themselves in new localities into new communities or congregations, if we want to hold our own as a denomination. A congregation is necessary to develop Christian character and Christian virtues.

"No man liveth to himself." We have to work for each other, work with each other, and work on each other.

But there is a limit to the size of a congregation. If the community becomes too large and too crowded the members have the tendency to become clanish and extreme congregationalists, who do not seem to fit together. Our practice is to stay in the old community as long as we can; when that becomes impossible, we go wherever we please. We have no program, no system. Many young people do not want to go to a new place, because they are afraid to have that competition over again.

We are acting as if we are a complete, a finished product, rather than one in the making. We had

the congregations organized in pioneer days, or in the few following years when there was plenty of open country. Now all that open country has been bought up and developed. We seem to have reached the dead center in that respect.

A healthy, growing denomination must prove itself in establishing new congregations, not in making a few congregations super-large. This causes a struggle for the survival of the financially fittest. Many have to give up the struggle and turn to a new occupation in a new place.

This article is not to be construed as if these problems are hopeless. But they do confront us more than anything else in regard to the upbuilding of the church.

